

MEDIA RELEASE

NEWS FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF TASMANIA

DATE: WEDNESDAY, 21 NOVEMBER 2007

ATTENTION: Chiefs of Staff, News Directors



INTERNATIONAL EXPERTS CALL FOR \$5 MILLION FOR DEVIL GENETIC RESEARCH

A high-level, genetics workshop at the University of Tasmania in Hobart today concluded that \$5 million is immediately needed to undertake genetic research to save the Tasmanian devil.

Internationally recognised genetics and cancer experts agreed that an integrated program of research is urgently needed to describe the devil genome and determine how to overcome the problem of low genetic diversity in the devil population.

Their recommendations are based on what has been learned from the cheetah and mammoth, which like the devil, are species whose survival was compromised by low genetic diversity.

Professor Stephan Schuster from Penn State University, USA who is currently analysing the genome of the extinct mammoth says "There is a lesson to be learnt from extinct species. We should not wait for one or two years to begin working on the devil." "The normal pace of research grants is too slow to save the devil" he said. "We need \$5 million by 1 March 2008 to do what is needed".

Dr Vanessa Hayes, former South African, and now head of the Cancer Genetics Group at the Garvan Institute of Medical Research, New South Wales, said that the cheetah is a perfect comparison to the devil. "The cheetah was headed for extinction due to in-breeding and low genetic diversity, until genetics was used to guide selective breeding". "That project has been a wonderful success, and the cheetah is being saved".

Dr Kathy Belov, University of Sydney, has recently discovered that some western devils are genetically distinct from eastern devils and the devil facial tumour that threatens it. Dr Belov agrees that funding for an integrated program of devil genetic research is urgently needed. Dr Jeremy Austin, University of Adelaide expert in DNA studies of extinct species including the thylacine stated "We know what is needed, we have the expertise from studies on other species, and now we need to use the new DNA sequencing tools to save this species from extinction."

The workshop calls for financial support from State and Federal Governments, and private and corporate sources meet this challenge.

Who: Hamish McCallum, Senior Scientist, Save the Tasmanian Devil Program,
mobile: 0428 693712

What: Devil Genetics Workshop

Where: University Administration building

When: 21 November 2007, Wednesday, 2.30pm

Information Released by:

Media Office, University of Tasmania

Phone: 6226 2124 Mobile: 0417 517 291